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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: EDUCATION REFORM: WILL KING ABDULLAH'S  
ANNOUNCEMENTS REALLY CHANGE THE SYSTEM?

REF: RIYADH 228

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: King Abdullah announced on February 13 a six-year, SR 9 billion (USD 2.4 billion) project for the Development of Public Education, followed by an April 17 announcement of a general infrastructure project that allocates a total of SR 21.9 billion (USD 5.84 billion) for general and higher education projects. These projects come on the heels of a series of education-related recommendations that resulted from the Sixth Annual National Dialogue, which concluded in late 2006. The SAG has drafted requests for proposals for curriculum development and teacher training and plans to release them to the U.S. and Europe. Saudi education interlocutors are frustrated with the international community's focus on the need to change the curriculum, generally sharing the opinion that teacher training and methodologies are the problem, not the subjects covered in the curriculum. Moves to expand the freedom of private school operations have created a robust debate, with educators on both sides arguing whether private school development would positively benefit the stagnant public school system. END SUMMARY.

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Educational Reform in the Kingdom  
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¶2. (C) On February 13, King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz announced the King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education. This SR 9 billion (USD 2.4 billion), six-year project to develop the Kingdom's public education system focuses on four areas: the educational environment, extra-curricular activities, teacher training, and curriculum development. The two most significant components-- curriculum development and teacher training-- received the smallest amount of funding-- only SR 3.92 billion (USD 1.04 billion) out of the SR 9 billion total. Although this project was approved in February, no further details are available. However, the project's executive plan is currently under development by academic experts; it is unclear whether the experts are Saudis or expatriates.

¶3. (U) King Abdullah subsequently announced on April 17 a general infrastructure project that includes programs for the education sector. This SR 120 billion (USD 32 billion) dollar program with 1,800 individual projects in the fields of health, housing, education, roads, water, sewage, and telecommunications, dedicates 1,274 projects to general and higher education, including technical and vocational training. The majority of these projects are physical infrastructure projects costing SR 17 billion (USD 4.53 billion). The projects include the establishment of 27 educational complexes and 97 schools of varying sizes. There are also projects for post-secondary institutions, including

SR 4.9 billion (USD 1.3 billion) for 36 projects at Riyadh,s King Saud University.

14. (C) These new educational projects are consistent with many of the recommendations resulting from Saudi Arabia,s Sixth National Dialogue, which the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue conducted in 2006. 800 - 1,000 participants representing a range of views met in each of the Kingdom's 13 provinces to develop a series of recommendations relating to the educational system. In December 2006, Secretary General Faisal bin Abdul Rahman bin Mu'ammam told representatives of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue,s Human Development Working Group that the Dialogue,s recommendations would help Saudi Arabia to meet the needs of the 21st century. He noted that the Saudi educational system has gaps in such areas as the natural sciences and vocational training and skills, adding that the general level of education does not correspond with the Kingdom's religious and economic stature (reftel).

15. (U) The Saudi Government has embarked on other education-related reforms as well. The Ministry of Higher Education recently disclosed its plans to unite all girls' colleges in Riyadh into a single institution -- Riyadh University. This university will be managed entirely by women and fall under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education. Princess Al-Jowhara al-Faisal was appointed president of Riyadh University-- the first female university president in Saudi Arabia.

16. (C) The Kingdom's female universities are typically administered by their male counterpart universities, including control over the budget, and are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Riyadh University will serve as an umbrella organization for over 20 women's colleges

currently operating in Riyadh, and, according to the Institute of Public Administration, the Ministry of Higher Education has stated its intent to expand this concept to the eastern and western regions. However, the Ministry of Higher Education does not have a female branch, so women's universities will ultimately be governed by male Ministry officials.

17. (C) Contacts from various women's colleges have told PolOff that this move is a "real win" for female education in the Kingdom. By allowing the women's colleges control over their budgets, they can operate entirely independently from the male colleges, set their own priorities, and lobby for funding as they see fit. They also agree that by falling under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education, women's colleges will receive the proper guidance and attention required for an institution of higher education. These contacts contend that the Ministry of Education, which currently has responsibility for women's colleges, "tosses aside" these institutions because elementary and secondary schools are its priority.

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Curriculum Not to Blame for Problems in the System  
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18. (C) Head of curriculum development for girls' education in the Ministry of Education, Zainab Ibrahim (strictly protect), agreed to meet PolOff unofficially and off-the-record in her home on May 4 to discuss curriculum development in the Kingdom. Ibrahim told PolOff that the biggest problems in Saudi education today are teaching methodologies and resources, not the curriculum. Ibrahim-- who was formerly a primary school teacher-- said that the class sizes (usually over 40 students per teacher), the lack of modern teacher training, and use of rote memorization methodologies cause the education lag Saudi students experience in comparison with their western counterparts.

19. (C) A participant in last year's International Visitor Program on curriculum development, Ibrahim spent several weeks in 2006 visiting U.S. schools and religious

institutions, spreading the message that religion in Saudi curriculum is not what is breeding extremists. She insists that the textbooks and curricula for Islamic studies in schools are necessary and not harmful. What is harmful, she said, is teacher ideologies, combined with the lack of training, which can lead to inconsistent and sometimes 'extremist' messages being taught in the classrooms. Ibrahim said that the curriculum is reviewed annually and there has been progressive improvement. Ibrahim noted that this year's annual revisions include an increased focus on group work, problem solving, and hands-on experiments to engage the students on many levels. However, a lack of across-the-board training and antiquated methodologies prevents these changes from taking place rapidly.

¶10. (C) Education program coordinators from the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND) shared much of Ibrahim's perspective on curriculum development and teacher training in a May 14 meeting with PolOff. In addition to suggesting that the international community's focus needs to shift from curriculum development to teacher training, the coordinators emphasized the need to engage parents in this endeavor. They commented that many of the middle and lower class families are poorly educated and have not been exposed to the interactive methodologies employed in modern education. Additionally, many of these families only send their children to school to receive government stipends and have yet to realize the importance of providing their children with a "top notch" education.

¶11. (C) Unlike Ibrahim, the AGFUND coordinators think that because of the range of religious views and the lack of proper training for the teachers, religious studies should not be part of the public school curriculum and instead should be taught in the home. (NOTE: AGFUND is a quasi-public organization funded by Gulf Cooperation Council countries. It is headquartered in Riyadh and funds programs in coordination with United Nations agencies in 131 countries. Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz is the President of AGFUND and is very active in its programs. Due to his influence, the coordinators said that they have had a strong influence on the Ministry of Education. According to them, the organization tends to have more credibility because employees are Saudis-- not expatriates trying to tell the SAG how to conduct its business. AGFUND's Saudi education programs are conducted solely with the SAG and focus on policy and strategic planning. END NOTE.)

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A New Role for Private Schools?  
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¶12. (C) There has also been much debate recently about the status of private education in the Kingdom. Saudi education interlocutors from both the public and private sectors have expressed various opinions about the role of private institutions in the Saudi system. Some educators state that the recent trend of increasing the flexibility of private schools to develop their own curriculum, provide teacher training, select their own textbooks, and determine the language of instruction is favorable for the education system overall because these practices will likely spill over into the private sector. Since many private schools are actually staffed with Ministry of Education employees seconded to them, interlocutors said that "cross-pollination" is inevitable.

¶13. (C) Other educators, however, fear the rapid decline of the system if it is turned over to private companies or investors who are more concerned with profits than the quality of education. Similar to the U.S. debate over the establishment of charter schools in urban areas, many Saudis express frustration that the Government is avoiding the public school system's problems by merely building a parallel school system. However, as this system is only available to those who can afford it, it may only widen the gap between the wealthy and the poor in Saudi Arabia.

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Educational Reform - a Highly Sensitive Topic  
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¶14. (C) The subject of educational reform remains a highly sensitive topic for the SAG. Post has made numerous attempts to contact officials to discuss this issue, and while we have been able to meet with some officials, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to recent meeting requests with the suggestion this issue should be raised in the context of the Human Development Working Group. Officials who did speak to us regarding educational reform only agreed to do so unofficially.

¶15. (C) Other diplomatic contacts report that they have been unable to access SAG officials to discuss education. Canadian CDA recounted to PolOff on May 15 that Education Minister Abdullah al-Obaid finally met with the Canadian Ambassador in March after months of attempts to do so. Al-Obaid said very little during the meeting, which focused on teacher training, and commented that the Canadians should return after six months.

¶16. (C) Many of our interlocutors have suggested that the SAG's apparent unwillingness to discuss the details of educational reform is due more to its premature announcement about the program than to evasive intentions. The Saudis have drafted requests for proposals (RFP) for curriculum development and teacher training, and there are plans to establish an oversight agency headed by non-Saudis. The SAG plans to release these RFPs in the U.S. and Europe, approaching Post recently for assistance in finding suitable respondents.

¶17. (C) COMMENT: Although educators and administrators express frustration with the current system, they are also skeptical that the newly-proposed educational reform program will provide little more than new buildings and technology tools in the classrooms. Saudi society changes slowly, and the educational system is no different. While King Abdullah's nascent plans for educational reform appear to be in the best interests of the system, it will take much more awareness, training, and public involvement before any major overhauls can be successful. END COMMENT.

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